

- (i) Why does a neglect of these ideas foster moral relativism?
- (ii) What is the thought that great happiness is extreme and prolonged euphoria a "stupid thought"? What does great happiness depend on that the euphoria theory overlooks? (Consider as well her two other examples of mistaken views of happiness.)
- (iii) Suppose we accept that great happiness is not prolonged euphoria, but depends on devoting attention to things that matter. How would this help with a response to moral relativism?

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## DOES ANYTHING REALLY MATTER OR DID WE JUST EVOLVE TO THINK SO?

Life is preferable to death. Health is better than sickness. We should care for our children, not harm them. Altruists are to be admired rather than condemned. Cheaters ought to be punished, not rewarded.

These and many other evaluative beliefs assail us with great emotional force. They strike us as self-evidently correct and command a high degree of consensus across time and cultures. It is tempting to suppose that they are recognitions of independent truths about what matters.

But what if we hold such values "just" because the mindless process of evolution by natural selection shaped us that way? What if the best scientific explanation of our deepest evaluative convictions is simply that these were the ones that it "paid" to have in the struggle to survive and reproduce? Would the truth of that explanation undermine our values? Or, rather, *should* it?

### 1.

Sometimes learning the causal origins of a belief can undermine it. Suppose a friend asks you who the twentieth president of the United States was, and an answer springs to mind. "Rutherford B. Hayes," you say, feeling pleased at your mastery of

U.S. history. Your friend bursts into laughter. "You really don't remember, do you?" she says. "That's one of the beliefs the hypnotist implanted in you!" Dismayed, you recall that last night you served as a volunteer in a hypnosis demonstration. Your confidence that Hayes was the twentieth president vanishes. With no other information currently at your disposal, you realize you have no idea whether Hayes was the twentieth president or not.

Other times, learning the causal origins of a belief can strengthen it. Suppose a man approaches you on the street, asking for directions, and you think to yourself, "This guy is up to no good." As you try to put your finger on it, however, there's nothing about him that you can pinpoint. The man is polite and personable. You worry that too many years in the city have made you grumpy and paranoid. Then it hits you: This is the murder suspect you saw profiled a few weeks ago on *America's Most Wanted*! Your belief that the man is up to no good reasserts itself with great force. As you reach nervously for your cell phone, you realize that although it took some moments for your conscious thought process to catch up, at some level your mind had immediately drawn the connection with the murder suspect you'd seen on TV.

These cases illustrate how learning new information about a belief's genealogy can bring about an adjustment in that belief—sometimes diminishing one's confidence in the belief, other times bolstering it. Moreover, notice: Not only do we think these adjustments in belief *would* take place; we think they *should* take place. We think, in other words, that suspending belief in the hypnosis case and increasing one's confidence in the *America's Most Wanted* case are *rationally appropriate* responses to the new information about these beliefs' origins.

Let's explore further why these responses seem rationally appropriate. In the first case, you learn that your belief that Hayes was the twentieth president has its origins in a causal process that as far as you know has nothing to do with whether Hayes was in fact the twentieth president. As far as you know, in other words, the hypnotist last night had no interest in implanting in you a true belief on the subject. When the answer "Hayes" first sprang to mind, it was natural to assume that the belief had its causal origins in your high school history class or some other reliable source. When you learn the belief's actual origin, however, you realize that you have no reason to regard your initial hunch as any guide to the truth on the matter. Moreover, as we have stipulated, you have no other relevant information currently at your disposal. It is therefore rational for you to suspend belief pending access to further information.

In the second case, in contrast, you learn that your belief was, initially without clear conscious awareness on your part, caused by facts directly relevant to the question whether the man was up to no good. Someone's having been profiled as a murder suspect on *America's Most Wanted*, after all, is a pretty good reason to think he is up to no good, and that turns out to be exactly the fact you were responding to when you formed the initial belief, though you didn't realize it at first. Upon discovering the *cause* of your initial hunch, you simultaneously discover what you recognize to

be a good *reason* for it. It is therefore rational for you to increase your confidence in the belief accordingly.

## 2.

Can we draw any general lessons? Suppose one learns a new causal explanation of one's belief that *P*, where "*P*" stands for some proposition. When should that genealogical discovery diminish one's confidence in the belief, and when should it increase one's confidence? Our two cases suggest the following answer:

### PRINCIPLE OF UNDERMINING VERSUS VINDICATING GENEALOGIES

*Undermining genealogy:* If the causal process that gave rise to one's belief that *P* is such that (as far as one knows) there is no reason to think that it would lead one to form true beliefs about the subject matter in question — and if (as far as one knows) there is no other good reason to believe that  $P \rightarrow$  then one should suspend belief that *P*.

*Vindicating genealogy:* If, on the other hand, the causal process that gave rise to one's belief that *P* constitutes or otherwise reveals (what is, as far as one knows) a good reason to believe that *P* — a reason of which one was not previously aware — then (all else remaining the same) one should increase one's confidence that *P*.

Notice something important about this principle. According to it, genealogical information *by itself* implies nothing one way or another about whether we should continue to hold a given belief. Rather, in order validly to draw any conclusions about whether or how to adjust one's belief that *P*, one must assess the *rational significance* of the genealogical information, locating it in the context of a larger set of premises about *what counts as a good reason* for the belief that *P*. For example, "that I was hypnotized to think so" is not a good reason to think Hayes was the twentieth president, whereas "that my competent high school teacher said so" would be a good reason. Your belief that Hayes was the twentieth president is undermined because you learn that your initial hunch was based on no good reason, whereas your belief that the man is up to no good is vindicated because you learn that your initial hunch was based on a good reason.

## 3.

Armed with the above principle, let's turn now to what we might call our "evaluative hunches" and their genealogy. The theory of evolution by natural selection offers profound insight into the causal origins of our species' *most basic evaluative tendencies*, where by this I mean our tendencies to value certain very general types of things rather than others.

Consider, for example, the following evaluative claims:

- (1) The fact that something would promote one's survival is a reason to do it.
- (2) The fact that something would promote one's health is a reason to do it.
- (3) The fact that something would help one's child is a reason to do it.
- (4) The fact that someone is altruistic is a reason to admire, praise, and reward him or her.
- (5) The fact that someone has cheated (not holding up his or her end of a cooperative deal) is a reason to shun, condemn, and punish him or her.

The most basic evaluative impulses that are expressed by (1)–(5), while of course not universal, are overwhelmingly common among human beings across history and cultures. Versions of them are even evident in close biological relatives such as the chimpanzees. Why is that?

To sharpen the question, consider the following conceivable evaluative views:

- (1') The fact that something would promote one's survival is a reason not to do it.
- (2') The fact that something would promote one's health is a reason not to do it.
- (3') The fact that something would help one's child is reason not to do it.
- (4') The fact that someone is altruistic is a reason to dislike, condemn, and punish him or her.
- (5') The fact that someone has cheated (not holding up his or her end of a cooperative deal) is a reason to seek out that person's cooperation again and praise and reward him or her.

Consider also even more bizarre possible evaluative views such as the following:

- (6) The good life is one devoted to screaming constantly.
- (7) One ought to do cartwheels every four seconds until one dies.

Why do human beings generally tend so strongly in the direction of values of the kind expressed by (1)–(5) as opposed to other conceivable values — for example, those expressed by (1')–(5'), (6), and (7)? An evolutionary biological perspective sheds enormous light. For the theory of evolution by natural selection explains not only the existence of certain *physical* traits such as our lungs, eyes, and ears, but also the existence of certain *psychological* traits such as our devotion to our children and our enjoyment of food and sex.

Not every observable trait (whether physical or psychological) is an adaptation that can be explained by natural selection; the importance of this point cannot be

overemphasized. But when it comes to the kinds of basic evaluative tendencies expressed by (1)–(5), a powerful evolutionary explanation of their widespread presence in the human population is in the offing. That explanation, very roughly, is that ancestors with a tendency toward values such as (1) through (5) would have tended to leave more descendants than others with a tendency toward values such as, say, (1') through (5') or (6) or (7). It is fairly obvious, for example, why a creature who thought its survival was a good thing and that its offspring deserved protection would tend to leave more descendants than a creature who thought its survival was a bad thing and that its offspring should be eliminated. It is also fairly obvious why a tendency to reward those who helped one and punish those who cheated one would have a better evolutionary “payoff” than the reverse.

Complications abound. The causes that have shaped human values are innumerable, and the suggestion that there are innate predispositions in the direction of some values rather than others does not imply that we — either as a species or as individuals — are genetically determined to hold any one particular value. On the contrary, above all we evolved to be flexible creatures — evaluatively incredibly malleable — and we are capable of holding any given value up for reflective scrutiny and rejecting it if we think rejection warranted. The point is rather that while it's often the diversity of human values that captures our attention, on another way of looking at things it's actually the *uniformity* that is striking. If we compare the evaluative views that human beings actually tend to hold with the universe of *conceivable* evaluative views, we see that these values fall within a relatively narrow range and consistently display a particular kind of content. And there appears to be a very good Darwinian explanation for that.

#### 4.

Assume such an explanation can be borne out (and more on it below). Should this information about the genealogy of our values undermine them, as in the hypnotism case? Or might it somehow vindicate them, as in the *America's Most Wanted* case?

The Principle of Undermining versus Vindicating Genealogies tells us to focus on the following question: Is the causal process in question (here, evolution by natural selection) such that there is any reason to think that it would lead us to form true beliefs about the subject matter in question (here, evaluative truths about how to live)? If yes, then the evolutionary explanation of our most basic values may vindicate them. If no, then the evolutionary explanation of our most basic values may undermine them.

Immediately we hit complications, however. Unlike the case of “Who was the twentieth president?,” where we are more or less clear on what would count as reliable means of arriving at true beliefs on the subject (allowing one's beliefs to be shaped by a hypnotist is not; listening to one's history teacher is), the nature of *this* subject

matter—the subject matter of *what is valuable and how to live*—is itself a highly contested and puzzling question. Indeed, the nature of this subject matter is the focal point of the whole subfield of philosophy known as *metaethics*, which is riven with disagreement.

So how do we proceed? There are any number of competing metaethical views on the nature of value. It will be helpful to focus on one key distinction among these views, namely the contrast between *mind-independent* versus *mind-dependent* conceptions of value.

At issue between such conceptions is the question: Are things valuable ultimately *because we value them*, or are at least some things valuable in a way that is robustly *independent of our valuing them*? According to *mind-independent* conceptions, it's the latter: there are at least some things that possess their value in a way that is independent of the evaluative attitudes that we might happen to hold toward them, where by *evaluative attitudes* I mean mental states such as an agent's values, cares, desires, states of approval and disapproval, unreflective evaluative tendencies, and so on. According to *mind-dependent* conceptions, in contrast, there are *no* independent truths about what is valuable. Rather, if something is valuable, then this is ultimately in virtue of our evaluative attitudes toward the thing—such that if our evaluative attitudes were to change radically enough, so that it was no longer in any way implied by our own attitudes that the thing was valuable, it would thereby cease to *be* valuable. We all hold a mind-dependent view of *some* kinds of value. For example, we all agree that the value of chocolate ultimately depends on the fact that people like it. No one thinks that had human beings all found chocolate disgusting, we would have been missing an independent fact about chocolate's value. The question is whether *all* value is ultimately like that. The mind-dependent theorist says “yes”; the mind-independent theorist says “no.”

## 5.

Our tools refined with this distinction, let's return to our question: *Is the causal process in question (here, evolution by natural selection) such that there is any reason to think that it would lead us to form true beliefs about the subject matter in question (here, evaluative truths)?* Since the nature of the subject matter is contested, let's try “plugging in” first one conception of value and then the other, and see what undermining or vindicating “results” we get. Start with a mind-independent conception of value. If we conceive of evaluative truths as robustly independent of our evaluative attitudes, is there any reason to think that evolutionary forces would have shaped us in such a way as to be reliable at detecting those truths?

You might think yes. After all, evolutionary forces seem to have made us reliable about a lot of things. We're pretty good at detecting objects and movement in our immediate environment, for example, and a great deal else. Why not think that evolutionary forces similarly made us skilled at detecting independent evaluative

truths? On this line of thought, it somehow promoted reproductive success to grasp independent evaluative truths, and so ancestors with an ability to do so were selected for.

But this proposal fails. The suggestion is that *somehow* it promoted reproductive success to grasp the independent evaluative truth, but we haven't been told yet why or how, and until we've been told this, we have no explanation at all. *Why* would it promote reproductive success to detect the independent evaluative truth? In the case of predators, trees, or fires, it is obvious why it would promote reproductive success to detect them, for these things can kill you or injure you if you fail to notice them. What happens, though, if one fails to notice an independent evaluative truth about how to live? Well, one won't live in accordance with the independent evaluative truth about how to live, but that's not an answer with any explanatory power. It just leads to a repeat of the question: *Why* would it hurt reproductive success not to live in accordance with the independent evaluative truth about how to live?

Consider evaluative views (1) through (5) again. To explain why we evolved with a tendency to accept these views, there is no reason to suppose that these evaluative views are *true* and that it promoted reproductive success to recognize such truths. The best explanation is simpler: All we need to notice is that a creature who accepts these evaluative views — valuing its survival, health, and offspring, for example — will tend to look out for itself and its offspring and so will of course leave more descendants than a creature who, say, despises its own survival, health, and offspring. Truth and falsity have nothing to do with which values would proliferate and which would die out. Thus, if we assume a mind-independent conception of value, it's not at all clear why evolutionary forces would have shaped us to value those things that were, as a matter of independent fact, valuable. It seems that evolutionary forces would just push us to value those things such that valuing them motivated us to do things that promoted survival and reproduction.

It appears that if we conceive of evaluative truths as robustly mind-independent, there is no reason to think that our species arrived at its most basic evaluative assumptions in a way that is reliable with respect to those truths. The case of evolution and value would appear to be more like the hypnosis example, where the causal process that gave rise to the belief in question is not — as far as we can see anyway — one that we have any reason to suppose is a reliable means of arriving at true beliefs about the subject matter. It would seem that we should abandon all confidence in our values and conclude that they have been shaped in a way that bears no relation to the truth.

It cannot be exaggerated what a radical move this would be — to abandon all confidence in our values. To conclude that we are unreliable about the evaluative truth would be to accept *global evaluative skepticism* in the sense of a conviction that one has no idea how to live. Is it plausible, however, to think that when you wake up in the morning, you have no idea at all how to live? That as far as you know you haven't the slightest clue as to whether you should spend your life screaming constantly, doing cartwheels, or something else?

Recall, though: We arrived at this skeptical result only on a certain assumption about the nature of evaluative truths, namely that they are mind-independent. So maybe we're not forced to it. What happens if we plug in a mind-dependent conception of evaluative truths?

If a mind-dependent conception of value is right, then the evolutionary origins of our most basic evaluative "hunches" would seem to be no threat to the idea that we're at least somewhat reliable about the subject matter of how to live. For on a mind-dependent conception, it doesn't matter *what* the causal origins of our most basic evaluative convictions are: since what *is* valuable is ultimately just a function of whatever we start out taking to be valuable, on a mind-dependent conception, we are able simply to start wherever we start with no worry that those starting points are in some deep sense off-track. It's not exactly that our initial evaluative hunches are *vindicated*, on a mind-dependent view; it's rather that vindication turns out not to be an issue at the deepest level. That's because on a mind-dependent view, there is no question of missing something in the very end with one's evaluative attitudes; value is instead understood as something created or constructed by those attitudes.

## 6.

If the arguments of the previous section are correct, then whether we get an undermining result depends on the conception of value we plug in. A mind-independent conception of value, when coupled with the evolutionary genealogy, leads to global evaluative skepticism, whereas a mind-dependent conception has no such implication. Does this mean that we have to settle the issue of whether value is mind-independent or mind-dependent before we can know whether an evolutionary explanation of valuing is undermining or not?

I would argue not. Rather, I would argue that these very results — the undermining result if we assume a mind-independent conception, and the non-undermining result if we assume a mind-dependent conception — are actually what *settles* the debate between these two views of value, with the right conclusion being that the undermining result implied by the mind-independent conception is so implausible that it's the mind-independent conception that must be thrown out.

The evolutionary theory of our origins is overwhelmingly supported by our best science. Taking that as a fixed point, I suggest that it is much more plausible to think that a *mind-independent conception of value is false* than it is to think that *we have no idea how to live*, which is the conclusion that results if we pair a mind-independent conception of value with an evolutionary genealogy of valuing. Accepting this radical skeptical conclusion would involve nothing less than suspending all evaluative judgment, and either continuing to move about but regarding oneself as acting for no reason at all; or else sitting paralyzed where one is and just blinking in one's ignorance of how to go forward. Accepting the conclusion that value is mind-dependent,



on the other hand, preserves many of our evaluative views — allowing us to see why we are reasonably reliable about matters of value — while at the same time allowing us to see ourselves as evolved creatures.

The suggestion is that in response to *this* genealogical investigation, we should — to the extent we started out with a conception of value as mind-independent — *revise our conception of the subject matter*. That move might seem odd. It's as though upon learning that your belief about Hayes had its origin in hypnosis, you find it *so implausible that you could be wrong about whether Hayes was the twentieth president* that you opt to change your conception of the subject matter, concluding that facts about who was the twentieth president are constituted by facts about who you *think* the twentieth president was, no matter what the source of your views, hypnotism included.

Obviously in that context, such a move would be absurd. But as always in philosophy, it's a question of what's most plausible all-things-considered. I claim that in the case of the evolutionary origins of valuing, the weakest link in the overall picture — the thing that must go — is a mind-independent conception of value.

We have been asking whether an evolutionary biological explanation of our values ought to undermine them. The answer I've suggested is "yes and no." The answer is "yes" to the extent *you started out thinking that there are mind-independent truths about value*. If that was your view going in, then I've suggested that you ought to abandon it and move to a mind-dependent conception. But once you adopt a *mind-dependent* conception of value — or if you already held such a view to begin with — then the answer is "no," evolutionary explanations of our values aren't undermining in the least.

Your *metaethical* view might need to change, in other words. But your most basic evaluative convictions — that life is preferable to death, that health is better than sickness, that we should care for our children, that altruism is admirable while cheating is to be condemned — all these deepest values should remain untouched by genealogical revelations. In answer to the title's question: Nothing "really" matters in the sense of mattering independently of the attitudes of living beings who *take* things to matter, but the nice fact is that living beings evolved, began taking things to matter, and thereby *made* things matter.

### TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. "Sometimes learning the causal origins of a belief can undermine it . . . Other times, learning the causal origins of a belief can strengthen it." Street gives examples of both types of effect. Give an example of an undermining and a strengthening genealogy.
2. What is metaethics about? Why does Street think that we need to explore competing metaethical views in order to decide whether evolutionary explanations of our most basic values are undermining or vindicating?

3. State in your own words the distinction between mind-dependent and mind-independent conceptions of value. Which conception of value does Street think we should endorse?
4. Evaluate the truth or falsity of these two claims:
  - (i) Assuming a mind-independent conception of value, evolution provides an undermining genealogy of our basic evaluative tendencies.
  - (ii) Assuming a mind-dependent conception of value, evolution provides a vindicating genealogy of our basic evaluative tendencies. (In evaluating this claim, be sure to read the last paragraph of section 5 carefully).

### NOTES AND QUESTIONS

1. According to Street, "The theory of evolution by natural selection offers profound insight into the causal origins of our species' *most basic evaluative tendencies*."
  - (i) Pick two entries from Street's list of basic evaluative tendencies and provide a quick sketch of how the theory of evolution by natural selection explains them.
  - (ii) Think of an alternative explanation of our most basic evaluative tendencies. (The explanation need not be one that you find compelling; just another candidate.)
  - (iii) Street thinks that the evolutionary explanation provides an undermining genealogy, if we accept a mind-independent conception of value. Is your alternative explanation also undermining, on the mind-independent conception of value?
2. If value is mind-dependent, then, Street argues, evolutionary explanations of our basic evaluative tendencies are not undermining (though they are not vindicating either). Why not? Suppose I say:

**Mind-Dependence:** X is good for people generally if and only if people generally value X.

Is Mind-Dependence a plausible account of value? (Does it accurately state Street's account of mind-dependence?) Suppose we all think salt is good for us until we learn that it is unhealthy, thus not good: so we do now value it, but it is not good for us. Cases like this may have motivated Street not to endorse Mind-Dependence. She says that mind-dependent views make value "ultimately" a matter of "our evaluative attitudes." In this spirit, we might modify Mind-Dependence to something like:

**Informed Mind-Dependence:** X is good for people generally if and only if people would value X if they were well informed about X and the consequences of having (using, pursuing) X.

Informed Mind-Dependence does connect value "ultimately" to our evaluative attitudes: being good is a matter of what we would value under idealized conditions. But

it allows for some distance between our current values and what is good for us. Now though we may ask a question about Informed Mind-Dependence like the question that Street asks about mind-independent conceptions of value: Why should we suppose that evolutionary forces made us skilled at valuing what is good—that is, what we would value if we were well-informed?

Can you find a variant of Mind-Dependence that meets two requirements: (i) it presents a plausible condition on being a good thing (more plausible than Mind-Dependence); and (ii) evolutionary forces plausibly have made us good at grasping the condition (more plausibly than with Informed Mind-Dependence)?